

The End of the Eurocrats' Dream in Endless Europe

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One person's dream is another person's nightmare. This oneiric truth indicates the relative meaning of dreams, yet it also invites a wake-up call. *The End of the Eurocrats' Dream* volume edited by Damian Chalmers, Markus Jachtenfuchs and Christian Joerges is such a wake-up call warning fellow academics, European politicians and the general public that what used to be presented by many advocates and agents of European integration as a wonderful dream is now often experienced as a nightmare with potentially disastrous effects for European and national politics in all countries of the EU.

The book has a number of contributors with different views, yet sharing a common ethos of their critical analysis of the EU's current multiple crises. They believe that European integration failed Europeans and we need to reevaluate EU policies and reformulate their conceptual framework to renew their legitimacy. The most important quality of this volume of essays, therefore, is that it marks the end of the EU's dogma that any criticism of the Union's overall political development and specific policies must be labeled 'anti-European'. Responding to the Eurozone crisis and its political consequences at European and national levels, this group of academics actually proves the contrary need to engage in debates about the fundamentals of the European integration project by all who still care about it.

Similarly, Otmar Issing, the first chief economist of the ECB, recently [warned](#) in the *Central Banking* journal, the EU cannot go on endlessly its usual political way of "muddling through, struggling from one crisis to the next". According to him, "the no bail-out clause is violated every day" despite the European Court of Justice's ruling that the ECB's interventions are not in breach of EU law and the European Commission's politics represents "the overwhelming moral hazard" because the Union's current economic and political structures cannot survive the next economic crisis. The following text, therefore, further contributes to this common feeling of the current Union's *stasis* before its next *crisis*.

Societal and political tensions determine all elections, referenda and other processes of democratic will-formation across the Union. Looking, for instance, at the last European elections in 2014, one can immediately see that they were not a test, but a protest. In many Member States, major spoils, if not outright victory, went to political parties keen either to hack away at the European Union's current cast or lift their country out of the euro area or even the Union itself.

Needless to say, this is a paradoxical situation – though hardly unusual in a democratic society – where candidates seek seats in a representative body by making a pre-election promise to destroy that very body. This paradox also encapsulates the essence of political extremism without our having to reach for an ideological interpretation to describe it. According to this definition, an extremist is anyone who tries to shut down a game he is playing, but the whys and wherefores he gives are irrelevant.

Although extremists did not score outright victory in these European elections, they did bolster their position and, in the coming years, will try to nudge the chess pieces of the European left, right and liberal middle-of-the-road off the board. The voters in the various member countries were protesting not only against the EU itself, but just as much – if not more – against political representation at home. Political analysts subsequently came up with a plethora of reasons and explanations for this state of play and the election outcome. Some warned but didn't understand; others understood but didn't warn. Admittedly, however, the result is conducive to something that the European Union has been lacking: politicisation through conflicts and disputes not only on technical solutions, but on the very essence of the EU and politics *per se*.

As the editors of *The End of the Eurocrats' Dream* successfully argue, European integration's sympathisers can no longer continue to rely on the simple formula of „there is no alternative“; from now on, they will have to sniff out public support for their agenda. Technocratic solutions, in which the final say rests with economists, lawyers, managers and other experts, have been dispossessed of their exclusive legitimacy even within Europe's

institutions. The simulacra of factions in the European Parliament, which has barely any ability to represent the political will and to police the European Commission's executive power, will have to change. Consequently, 20 years late, we are now seeing something making its way into the EU that lawyers had vainly tried to introduce in European treaties during the 1990s, followed by members of the Convention that was laying the groundwork for the failed European constitution. Even at European level, the policy being shaped is increasingly based on opposition, including extreme opposition, which now makes it impossible to accept the EU simply as an unquestioned given.

Twenty years ago, supporters of European federalism were bemoaning the lack of a European public, including media, that would gradually form not only European transnational consumer and non-governmental organisations or trade unions, but also political parties and – with them – a European democracy based on shared identity. Today, politics appears to be not a question of identity, but rather of contestations, disputes and struggles – that Greek *agon* giving rise to a democratic *agora*, or public space, where unity is born of scathing conflicts and decisions that have not been predetermined.

Anti-European parties, then, have paradoxically been instrumental in moulding European *agonistic politics* – a politics of disputes and struggles with an open and uncaged result. The fundamental mistake made by Eurofederalists and Eurosceptics alike has always been their view of the EU as a nascent state – one wanting it, the other deeming it a threat. The Union's post-Maastricht developments after 1992, however, showed that building a common state with democratically legitimate and representative bodies was impossible at the European level. Nevertheless, the state and politics are not one and the same, hence we are now witnessing the birth of stateless European politics and debates on this subject both at European level and in member states. While this dispute takes on various shapes, the questions remain the same: Does European integration make any sense in the face of manifold forms of global integration? Can it withstand global and internal crises? And how important a role is played today by the European continent in the sea of global society?

The last chapter of the volume, written by Christian Joerges, opens with two words – 'Constitutional Emergency!' – used by the most renowned German lawyers to describe the current state of the Union and its disastrous development ignoring the well known and discussed risks of establishing a monetary Union without a political one. Joerges warns against the idea and practice of pushing the political Union 'through the back door' of crisis management techniques without democratic legitimacy and accountability. More importantly, they refuse to engage in yet another Schmittian reflection on the Union's crisis. Instead, they emphasise the necessity to 'take seriously' all aspects of European integration – the economic, legal and political – and focus on the political dimension of economy as well as the economic dimension of legal regulation. A nuanced critical approach highlighting the importance of mutual understanding between European economists, lawyers and politicians is preferable to the simplistic recipes of political mobilisation. Joerges' important chapter tells us that 'emergencies' should be resolved by the recognition of varieties of overlapping 'reasons' in European society rather than through the self-imposing political 'will'.

In the Doge's Palace in Venice, Titian's *St Christopher* adorns the space above the doorway connecting the doge's private apartment with the halls where the city state's political authorities held meetings and took decisions. Each doge must have seen this fresco whenever he exited his private suite and entered the realm of public office. St Christopher is captured in dramatic mid-movement, radiating the power, strength and certainty with which he carries the Christ child on his shoulder across the sea, with Venice outlined on the horizon. This is not the power of supernatural intervention from the heavens, but a realistically depicted human body of flesh and bone. There is no place here for the allegorical imagination, grandeur or decorativeness so emblematic of Titian's other works. The image is surprisingly spartan and yet clearly and succinctly says that, although saints perform miracles, every miracle takes a huge amount of work.

Needless to say, Titian's painting of St Christopher does have its own superficial interpretation, in which Venice, a Christian naval power, is duty-bound to defend the faith against enemies from without. Be that as it may be, the countryside and the city on the horizon are reduced to an almost primitive form, while the saint's muscles are clenched and his face and upward gaze signal both weariness and uneasy doubt as to whether a human being can handle a superhuman task. Even the quickest of glances by the doge as he hurried to a meeting of the Senate of the Republic of Venice would have been a reminder that the weight of his political responsibility was

beyond human. This piece of visual art is a sign that not even the republican government of a maritime and trading superpower relies solely on computations of the possible, but also on its ability to take care of what, at first glance, is the impossible and *superhuman* task of ensuring peace, stability and prosperity in a human community.

Politics is the art of the impossible, even though most „political realists“ claim otherwise. Would it honestly have occurred to you to cross the Alps with elephants? Would you have revolted if you had had to call yourselves „Bolsheviks“ to cover up the fact that there were so desperately few of you? And would you have prioritised war over a separate peace when your enemy's army was better fitted out and controlled virtually the entire continent, as Churchill did during the Battle of Britain?

Venice is a similar phenomenon in that hardly anyone could have imagined that villages on islands teeming with mosquitoes and malaria, where the original inhabitants of the former Roman Empire fled from the Germanic conquerors, could give rise to a city state that would trade with the whole world and politically and militarily dominate not only the Mediterranean, but also a substantial part of the European continent. As though the maritime republics of the Venetians, Genoese and Pisans had preserved the ancient Romans' civil code, which had been recovered from the freedom of the sea and its trade routes. To recognise Byzantine culture, then, you have to go to Venice. To study the decorativeness of Islamic culture, visit the Pisa Baptistry or San Miniato al Monte in Tuscany.

Medieval maritime republics appropriated the republican aristocratic culture, trade and legal practices, and social structure of imperial Rome, and with it the unrestrained freedom of cultural fundamentalism and openness towards foreigners with something to offer the city and its residents. Unlike the culturally and ethnically exclusive Greeks, the Romans – for the time – behaved benevolently towards foreigners and tended to associate civilisational superiority primarily with political and legal institutions, such as citizenship, although this was not difficult for foreigners to obtain.

If today's Europe is to align itself with its ancient past, it must place civic openness and the freedom of trade routes on the same footing as quoting Socrates' sayings, Sophocles' dramas, Virgil's verses and Cicero's speeches, which it is so fond of.

Not so long ago, the German nation – obsessed with its cultural exclusivity and civilisational superiority – imagined that the German Reich would be a continental *Behemoth*, an unconquerable continental monster domineering Europe, leaving the British Empire the role of *Leviathan*, the equally invincible sea creature. Since then, mercifully, political metaphors have changed, so we know that no imperial creature can dominate either sea or land entirely. Likewise, we know that no culture can be politically put above others and made an imperial fundamental. Fundamentalists raze empires but cannot build them, prevented by their own limitations, introversion and naked loathing of everything that is „other“. Civilisation begins only where society can unlock this otherness, and ends where, as in Venice, that otherness is hounded into the ghetto. Although this maritime republic was riding one of its cultural highs throughout the 16th century, in terms of civilisation it started to decline – at the very latest – from 1516, when it set up the Ghetto Nuovo for its Jewish inhabitants.

The European Union is the first ever attempt at transnational post-imperial politics. No wonder, therefore, that it concentrates in itself all historical paradoxes and tries to unite diverse cultures into a single civilisation, overcome conflicts between land and sea and thus shackle, at once, the two creatures of its own history – *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*.

Europe is proud of its culture and chose its anthem accordingly – Schiller and Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. Whenever I hear those notes and words, though, I picture scenes from Abuladze's *Repentance*, a film in which the female protagonist, Nina, is comforted by her friend saying that the arrest of their husbands was sure to have been a mistake and that they had to be brave and patient so that they could serve the great cause and future generations could be proud of them. Yes, cometh the hour, there may be big mistakes and innocents may be wronged, but we must be obedient and be guided by the magnitude of such historic moments, says the woman as she begins to sing Beethoven's composition, only for her cracked voice to be drowned out after a while by that famous chorus of crowds, whose joy-kindling song is overlaid by scenes in which Nina's arrested husband is

convicted and tortured.

Europeans committed dreadful atrocities on each other before they realised that a political vision cannot be built on Beethoven's tones and that a culture of this nature may be admired just as much by concentration camp commandants, sadistic KGB investigators and SS members. The European Union today may well espouse such a musical legacy, but its rhythm is captured far more by the electronic music of Kraftwerk, whose members had composed the album *Trans-Europe Express* as early as the 1970s.

Kraftwerk described our continent using railway metaphors in much the same spirit as Lars von Trier, for example, had done in his early experimental film *Europa (Zentropa)*. It is not important to find common ground, but points of intersection, where we can meet and from which we can mutually benefit. Railways, low-cost airlines and digital communication networks have done far more than all concert ensembles and political representations together to unite Europe. Goods and destructive ideologies alike can be moved around, but the fact that internet, rail and air networks cannot be anchored in any specific land or national identity is the best defense against such destruction. Europe must therefore be as endless as communication networks or the seas once sailed by Venetian merchants and sailors.

The effortlessness with which the younger generations navigate their way through Europe is astonishing and confirms that this unique project can be legitimate only if it expands the range of what is known in sociology as life chances. And herein lies the greatest danger and crisis of European integration: although European society is now exhaustively networked, these networks have ceased to generate decent life opportunities.

Admittedly, this is a global economic and social problem and not even the debt crisis is limited to the eurozone, as some Eurosceptics would have us believe. The Bank of England, for instance, responded to the financial crisis by pouring massive amounts of money into the national economy under its quantitative easing programme and devalued the pound against a basket of other currencies by several dozen per cent. The US Federal Reserve pursued a similar economic policy, while other countries, such as Japan and Brazil, tried to fuel domestic production and exports by devaluing their national currency. This sort of support for the national economy suits industry, but also increases the risk of inflation and impoverishes the local population whenever it goes abroad.

The euro crisis is just one of many manifestations of the current global financial crisis. However, the EU will lose its legitimacy if it fails to counter the consequent rapid decline in life chances. The 50% of young Spaniards who are unemployed and in uproar within *Indignados* – the movement of the irate – cannot be expected to grow up into responsible European citizens. The same holds true for the quarter of the Greek population that is unemployed, and so too for German citizens, who are now paying for structural faults in the euro area's economy and for the out-and-out corruption of the Greek elite and its inability to manage its own state.

All this shows how dangerous the old mode of technocratic integration supervised by non-majoritarian institutions and aiming at an ever closer harmonisation among the EU's member states has become for Europe itself and how the Eurocrats' dream is now every European's nightmare. In her chapter *What Europe does to citizenship*, Catherine Colliot-Thelene describes this crisis as the harmful impact of expert knowledge 'reserved for small circles of specialists' on daily lives of 'ordinary citizens.'

Before joining the EU, many nations including Czechs and Britons assumed that membership would solve their economic and political problems. Nowadays, however, we can see that the Union is not only a solution, but also a problem. To think that it could be otherwise would just have been naïve. We need to bear in mind that the EU should expand the life chances of future generations, not hobble them. Otherwise, more countries will be following the United Kingdom and opting for their EU-exits.

And let's also remember the plot of Trier's film in which the naïve American who wants to help post-war Germany and starts working as a conductor in sleeping cars eventually becomes involved in a pro-Nazi terror conspiracy. We should not succumb to the illusion that trans-European networks will resolve political problems for us as coolly as Kraftwerk's electronic sounds. On these networks, be they rail, internet or any other networks, hotheads are already present, harbouring apocalyptic visions of how to blow up the entire continent and build new *Behemoths* and *Leviathans* on the ruins. Let's not hand them the opportunity!

(Author's Note: This text uses the essay *Endless Europe* originally written in Czech as a response to the EU elections in 2014 and published in the weekly supplement Salon of the Pravo newspaper. Its full version is included in my forthcoming book *The Defence of Constitutionalism*)

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SUGGESTED CITATION Přibáň, Jiří: *The End of the Eurocrats' Dream in Endless Europe*, *VerfBlog*, 2016/11/22, <http://verfassungsblog.de/the-end-of-the-eurocrats-dream-in-endless-europe/>.